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The Iowa Review

Volume 14

Issue 2 *Spring-Summer: Writing From the World:
Selections from the International Writing Program
1977-1983*

Article 67

1984

What Is New at the Cementery

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Recommended Citation

Kohlhaase, Wolfgang and Hanna Monasquera. "What Is New at the Cementery." *The Iowa Review* 14.2 (1984): 187-192. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3060>

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WHAT IS NEW AT THE CEMETERY

THE STREETS WERE slippery; it was snowing the whole time. We avoided speaking about the cause for our trip. Only once my father said, "One after another, they go."

By the house at the edge of the settlement where the salt marshes begin there were already two cars standing, a Skoda and a Trabant. Three neighborhood children watched us curiously as we got out. We left the flowers in the car.

As we entered the yard, my aunt Lene saw us through the kitchen window and we saw her. Her eyes lit up with happy surprise; her voice shrilled girlishly, "They're here from Berlin."

But immediately afterwards, inside, while the women embraced each other, she wept and sniffled. I clasped her hand, likewise those of my two cousins whom I had not seen for ten years, and I was not able to say, "My sincere condolences." My female cousin had a husband, her second one, whom I did not know, and a son whom I had seen once when he was playing in the garden. Now he was serving in the army and had special leave for one day. My male cousin was also married; I had never met his wife. We greeted each other pleasantly, with an awkward, familiar strangeness, spoke about trivial things (the condition of the roads was handy), stumbled over the unaccustomed familiar form of address, "*Du*," and left the reason of our being there unmentioned.

"I hope there's enough food," Aunt Lene called from the kitchen as she ran busily back and forth, and put two more slices of meat in the frying pan. The women set plates and dishes on the extended table. We squeezed ourselves into chairs in the small room and wished each other a pleasant meal.

The place of my uncle Rudolf did not remain empty—it was too cramped for that. Where he always sat, at the head opposite the window, there now sat, as was surely proper, Aunt Lene, his widow. While we were passing each other the dishes with an overly polite "please" and "thank-you" in order to hide our embarrassment, while we were beginning to eat, everyone perhaps was thinking of him. There he had sat with a red-veined face and light-blue eyes. There he had sat, told stories in a leisurely spirit, made fun of his wife, did not stop laughing

as long as she did not stop scolding, poured his homemade wine, and moved his ailing right hand clumsily about on the table.

We ate and the tears ran down Aunt Lene's face as she gave us an account of how it was with him towards the end. He could not bear the pain and asked her to beat in his head with a brick. However, at Christmas he was still sitting at the window and getting angry at the children who were riding their sleds into his fence; year after year it was the same. "He got angry about that for thirty years," said Aunt Lene. And then she said, looking across the table, her mind set at ease, "You see, there was enough for everyone; there are even some vegetables and potatoes left over."

The footpath was iced over so that the women took each other by the arm. In front of the cemetery gate there was a toboggan-run, but the children rode around us skillfully and considerately. I unwrapped our flowers and shoved the paper into my pocket. The chapel was heated.

We sat down on the chairs to the right of the coffin and waited. In the window recesses candles were burning. Little by little, other mourners arrived and sat down on the left side, mostly older people with the air of moderately grieving neighbors, and then two men in postal uniforms and a full-figured woman in ski-pants and a postal-uniform jacket. Another woman in a fur coat appeared, walked routinely to the back of the chapel, placed her handbag on top of the parlor organ, sat down at it, took a handkerchief out of her handbag and wiped her nose. A young man in a black suit which had become too tight for him entered and clasped the hands of the mourners in the first row in mute sympathy. I sat in the second row. The man had frightened eyes behind a pair of spectacles; he carried a red plastic folder in his hand; on his lapel I saw the badge of the Socialist Unity Party. The parlor organ began to play. When it ended the man in the black suit stepped to his place at the head of the coffin, opened his folder and began to speak, and he read what he had to say.

"We have gathered here on a sad occasion. We must take leave from Rudolf L., the man, the father, our dear co-worker and comrade . . ."

He spoke rapidly and softly and seemed unsure of himself. Only now I began to wonder why no pastor was present. And I remembered vaguely that Uncle Rudolf had left the church a long time ago, for reasons having to do with his views on life and perhaps also for reasons of economy. So there was no sermon, but instead a speech, a quietly read speech. And what was missing were those expressions which illuminate

the inevitable and which so strangely stir the heart, even when we don't believe.

Not the servant of God, Rudolf L. had now ended his pilgrimage on earth and had entered into the Lord according to His unsearchable decision, but, if one were to believe this speech, the postal employee, Rudolf L. had simply died. The man in the black suit gave, so to speak, a brief assessment of the departure of my Uncle Rudolf. He noted the care which Aunt Lene bestowed on him towards the end as a sacrifice, even if in vain; the transfer to the municipal hospital could not be avoided; the treatment there was the best possible, but even that could not prevent the patient, who acted bravely under the circumstances, from expiring on a Wednesday night. He followed with a Goethe quote of a consoling nature; then the speech turned to the life of the dead man, who had already by the year 1911 moved from a small, remote Pomeranian town to Berlin, in order to learn the trade of locksmith. Two years later he joined the German Metalworkers Union. Then, however, went the speech, he had to go to the criminal war, cut loose by the imperialists, where he suffered a severe wound which barred him from the further practice of his profession.

I don't know much about Uncle Rudolf, but he told me of this wound which he received in France. His arm was full of hand-grenade splinters. He was taken back on a horse-drawn cart. When he finally arrived at the first aid station, a shed, the doctor was sitting at a table, shaving himself, and did not even look at him. At that point Uncle Rudolf, seventeen years old, half crazy with pain, lost control. He yelled, "I can't stand it anymore. Can't you shave yourself later?" To punish him, they let him lie for two days with a temporary bandage on, until maggots crawled out of the bloody gauze. The arm was not restored; it remained thin and stiff; Uncle Rudolf could not put on his jacket by himself ever again.

As a result of this wound, he obtained the position of mail carrier; that counted as an official career. Steering his bicycle with one arm, he rode the mail into the saltmarsh villages from 1925 on, a lifetime. He married; he had four children; two died. Only a long time after the Second World War did he get an office position.

Here I am picking up the speech again. It honored his work at the parcel window which was said to have been exemplary; he was esteemed by all his co-workers; this was true also for his conduct as a comrade.

Uncle Rudolf, I would like to add, did not have what is called a

political head; he was not one who debated; he was no dynamo of social progress. He owned no television set, though he read his district newspaper and listened to the radio. That he had joined the workers' party as an old man at his place of employment could no longer alter his postal career. Presumably it was simply the sum of many ciphers from his life which he had painstakingly accumulated. Why, when he was asked, after all that had happened, shouldn't he join it?

Before his last Wednesday, Aunt Lene told me, the constant pain came creeping overpoweringly from his disfigured arm and occupied his body. Uncle Rudolf screamed pitifully, half a century after he had been mutilated.

When the pastor talks it is easy to weep. He knows many parables about the mystery of death, in the face of which the world seems meaningless, our time in it fleeting. The pastor knows the effect of his words, which have undergone long testing. Even his voice is trained.

Perhaps the man with the plastic folder remembered the melody of the preached word, for he attempted to imitate it by delivering his speech in a gentle monotone which did not quite suit the text. I looked sadly at the jointed boards inside which Uncle Rudolf lay, without being able to say whether the ceremony pleased him. But, on the whole, he surely would have approved, for he had to come to terms with the facts.

Once I visited him at his postal window; it looked clumsy, the way he wrote with his left hand. Once, we smoked eels which he sometimes got in a tin drum from fishermen. Once, we went across the meadows by the side of the Uecker River, but I don't remember any longer what we talked about. I know little about him, really. But that now, when his life was talked of solemnly and sadly, the word "imperialism" was spoken and not a word like "unsearchable," this is something he has earned, I believe. In this respect, the young man in the black suit did justice to the old man in the wooden box. The shy, inexperienced young man was, strictly considered, a brave man, because what had been said for an unimaginable length of time in a certain way, he said in a different way. Not lifting his gaze from his folder, anxious not to misread anything, he stood, fearful for our brave venture, in a place which is unlikely to occur to anyone who thinks of the revolution.

Towards the end, the speaker raised his voice boldly and called out something which rhymed, but it could not be understood because at the same time the parlor organ started up. Six vigorous old men entered and

took off their black top hats. They carried the wreaths away, brought a shaft, and fastened it to a cart that one noticed only now. They pulled the coffin out. We followed it along a path, fringed by poplars, to a place where one could see across the meadows. The pallbearers lowered the coffin into the grave and the speaker stepped to the edge of it. He opened his folder again and looked into it, and said that one could certainly sympathize with the relatives as this was a difficult hour. I pondered on the little word "certainly" and saw how the speaker was freezing, because he had no coat on. He expressed the clear assumption that the family would surely seek out this place often in order to remember the deceased. In this way he gave the future a kind of direction. Then he closed his folder and spoke the beautiful old words, "Rest in peace."

We threw three handfuls of earth into the grave, not in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost but then, in whose name? The mystery of the number three? Or simply the time to draw three breaths and look back at someone who is disappearing at our feet?

Aunt Hedwig sobbed; my mother was quiet and composed; of eleven brothers and sisters there were now only four. After shaking hands people left quickly; we followed them slowly. My cousin said that the right speaker had not been able to come. There was one in the district administration who made speeches when a comrade was buried, but today he was in another part of the county where a forty-year-old man had hanged himself, and no one had wanted to speak at the grave of a suicide. So it was that a substitute who was facing his task for the first time had come to Uncle Rudolf's funeral.

"The content was good," my father said, "but he spoke too softly. Who, of the old people, can still hear that well?" He said that he had had a hard time not interrupting him.

In front of the chapel people gathered for the next funeral; at the cemetery gate a small, bright, yellow mail truck drove off, but the speaker waited for us and asked Aunt Lene how she had liked it. She liked it, said Aunt Lene. However, my father repeated loudly once more, "The content was good, but he spoke too softly." He also said that in Berlin they would make the graves deeper.

Then we were again sitting at the table and drinking comforting hot coffee and eating streusel cake, which always turns out so well for Aunt Lene because she makes it with yeast and baking powder. And, as always, someone asked, astonished, "Both? Yeast *and* baking powder?" My cousin told us that his father, when he visited him for the last time a

week ago Sunday, had still wanted to say something; he had constantly moved his lips but nothing could be understood. Somebody thought that at least it was good that spring was coming now; it would not be so hard then for Aunt Lene. She took up the idea. "Oh," she exclaimed confidently, "I have the chickens and the garden; those will keep me busy enough."

The streets were slippery as they had been in the morning; it was snowing again. The flakes swirled in the beam of the headlights. I thought with amazement that I, in my middle years, still did not understand death.

translated by Hanna Monasquera